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INTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Written statement* submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 January 2002]

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*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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ENG

Acid attacks on women in Bangladesh

1. While violence against women remains prevalent throughout Asia, acid attacks on women, especially in Bangladesh, stand out as one of its most despicable and barbaric manifestations.

2. Women are guaranteed equal legal protection as men under article 2(c) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Bangladesh acceded in 1984. Article 5(a) states that parties to the Convention shall take appropriate measures to modify social and cultural patterns towards the elimination of prejudices and discriminatory practices. Women are also guaranteed equality and protection under article 3 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Article 4 of the Declaration calls on states to eliminate violence against women irrespective of religious or cultural norms that may be invoked to condone it.

3. The number of acid attacks against women in Bangladesh is very difficult to document because many cases go unreported as the victims fear reprisals from their attackers. Nonetheless, many Bangladeshi non-government organisations claim that acid attacks have increased at an alarming rate in recent years. The Bangladeshi Acid Survivors' Foundation, established in 1999, notes that "acid violence is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the first documented acid violence case occurring in 1967". Figures from the Foundation indicate a distressing trend: 47 cases were reported in 1996, 130 in 1997, and 200 in 1998.

4. The immediate causes of these appalling and sometimes deadly acid-throwing attacks range from refusals of a marriage proposal, dowry disputes, domestic fights, and disputes over property. The physical effects of an acid attack are hideous. Skin tissue melts, and even bones can be dissolved. Many victims have lost their sight in one or both eyes. Since the victims are mostly poor women living in the countryside, they do not have money for medical treatment.

5. Acid attacks are one of the most vicious and sickening crimes not just because of the extreme pain they inflict on the women who are attacked, but also due to the lifetime stigmatization that follows. The physical and psychological consequences of acid attacks are extensive. Victims suffer from a severe loss of self-esteem, and often are unable to work or study. It is very unlikely that they will ever get married, dramatically affecting the victims' life economically and socially and causing their social isolation.

6. According to independent figures, very few acid attackers have been prosecuted, despite the fact that acid throwing was made a capital offence in 1983, and sentences from seven to twelve years in prison are mandated. According to the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association, of the 145 reported incidents it received in 1998, 87 cases were filed and a mere 14 men sentenced to prison.

7. The severe lack of prosecutions is an insult to the victims and reflects the underlying cause of the numerous acid attacks: Bangladesh is a male-dominated society where violence against women is a widely accepted part of everyday life. Many Bangladeshi men still see women as property and not as equal individuals, therefore not as people entitled to have an opinion. Hence, acid attacks are a barbaric response to the progress of women's economic and social position in Bangladesh.

8. According to the UN Population Fund's State of the World Population 2000 report, in terms of domestic violence against women Bangladesh is second-worst in the world, with 47 percent of all women violently assaulted by their male partners. This very clearly indicates that the Bangladeshi government is not doing enough to curb widespread gender violence. Particularly in the case of women attacked with acid, the lack of medical resources put to their disposal and the impunity enjoyed by most attackers reflects the lack of interest in solving this problem.

9. The improvement of the medical facilities for treatment of acid-burn victims and stronger enforcement of current laws on acid attacks would send a very positive signal to the victims and to Bangladeshi women in general. As the Asian Legal Resource Center does not condone capital punishment, it supports the use of long-term prison sentences for offenders under the current legal code, but not use of the death sentence. Efforts should also be made to secure legal assistance and protection for the victims, so that the attackers can be prosecuted without the women who have been attacked taking the risk of being re-victimized. Remedies are also needed to help the victims overcome problems faced due to the attack. Finally, the root cause of these acid attacks—the cultural patterns and values that discriminate against women—must be eradicated in keeping with the commitment the Government of Bangladesh made in acceding to CEDAW.

10. The Asian Legal Resource Centre urges the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, to pursue this very important issue with the new Government of Bangladesh in order to obtain effective remedies. The Centre urges the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and all other conventional and extra-conventional mechanisms of the Commission to take the following actions:

-Continue to address the issue of acid attacks on women in Bangladesh in their work and reports to the Commission;

-Request a report from the prosecuting branch of Bangladesh as to what actions have been taken to prosecute offenders of these crime, and request the Government of Bangladesh to adequately compensate the victims;

-Urge the Government of Bangladesh to use the media at its disposal to educate the public on ways to eradicate this crime; and

-Encourage the recently appointed National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh to take effective action to study and make proposals to the government to eradicate this crime.